

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT:

A St. Petersburg Times Editorial

“Officials pull a fast one”

Saturday, January 10, 2009

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The Times Says: “The real problem is that Republican lawmakers aren’t willing to have an honest discussion about the state’s dismal financial picture and are taking the easy but short-sighted route to balancing the budget.”

“The same Florida legislators who refuse to make it easier to collect sales taxes on Internet sales or tax services used by more affluent Floridians have found easier marks: speeders. Lawmakers are poised to significantly raise the fines for speeding and other traffic violations just to help keep the courts operating. And they aren't even being honest about it.

“In selling the higher fines to their colleagues during floor votes Friday, supporters argued there is an "epidemic of running of red lights and speeding" in Florida. Don't be fooled. The real problem is that Republican lawmakers aren't willing to have an honest discussion about the state's dismal financial picture and are taking the easy but short-sighted route to balancing the budget.

“The higher fines are aimed at raising \$63-million to prevent employee layoffs in the state's courts and offices of state attorneys and public defenders due to the state's current \$2.4-billion deficit. Fines for all traffic violations — from running a stop sign to having an expired license tag — would increase \$10. Speeders who are between 15 and 29 miles per hour over the speed limit will also be charged an additional \$25. The plan also ends the 18 percent discount violators receive if they go to traffic school. And both chambers also would require judges to impose fines in certain rulings.

“There are reasonable questions about the practical impact of these increases, including whether they fit the infraction or will prompt some police officers to avoid issuing more expensive tickets to drivers who may have trouble paying up. But speeders don't have lobbyists, and legislators are in no mood to debate the impact of their shortsightedness.

“Combined, the additional fines are expected to limit cuts to the state's court system to 1.25 percent — a far more tolerable level than the 4 percent cut many state agencies are facing. Yet lawmakers aren't willing to make similar

efforts to stave off painful cuts in other areas. State universities and community colleges are facing 4 percent cuts; public schools will receive 2 percent less per student. Hospitals serving Medicaid patients will face cuts that total nearly 14 percent over 18 months. And Florida will be cutting services to some of its poorest and weakest citizens, such as foster children and infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities. Next year the pressure will be even worse, when state economists predict the state faces a \$5.6-billion deficit.

"Yet the Legislature refuses to take even the smallest steps toward considering additional revenue for the short or long term. Democrats' calls to review sales tax exemptions or close a corporate tax income loophole went unheeded. Instead, Republicans are insisting on raiding up to \$1-billion more from critical state reserves. Senate President Jeff Atwater has pledged the Senate will consider new revenue options during the regular legislative session that begins in March, including raising the cigarette tax and closing some tax exemptions. That's a positive sign, but House Speaker Ray Sansom has shown no such leadership.

"Rep. Darryl Rouson, D-St. Petersburg, opposed the increases in traffic fines in a floor speech on Friday and urged lawmakers to avoid easy fixes. He's right. The state needs a better financial plan than keeping the courts open by raising the cost of speeding tickets.

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